

Book Review: Peter Beattie (2019) *Social Evolution, political psychology and the media in democracy. The invisible hand in the US marketplace of ideas.*

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In an ambitious project that much reminds of Kurt Lewin's work (e.g. 1939), the author presents in this book a theoretical integration of knowledge derived from memetics, evolutionary psychology, social psychology and comparative media research in order to identify key processes at hand in the production, consumption and meaning making of politically relevant information.

The author argues the need to integrate knowledge available at different levels of analysis in order to be able to understand the role media (and news media in particular) play in the democratic process. This approach is similar to that of Boykoff and Roberts' (2007) report on media coverage of climate change, where the authors identify a series of factors influencing the amount and quality of coverage of climate change related issues, as well as their likely effects on the audience. Indeed, this is in line with Crigler (2001)'s appeal, who suggests that the underestimation of the influential role of news discourse in political attitudes, feelings and behaviour is primarily due to a substantial lack of appropriate methodological tools able to identify and explain the processes involved in the co-construction of meaning. But while Crigler (ibid, Introduction) suggests that a critical discursive approach could be the answer to this issue, the author suggests drawing on a variety of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches to achieve this goal.

The proposal to include memetics and social evolution as an interpretative framework, as well as the call for integration of extant work across disciplines makes this theoretical contribution quite fascinating for scholars interested in public discourses around politics and democracy.

The overall theoretical framework is presented in the Introduction chapter (Chapter 1), where the author presents a case for integration of memetics (i.e. an evolutionary approach to the formation, development and spread of socially relevant information), social psychology (in particular, the study of how socially relevant information is constructed, stored, retrieved and interpreted by individuals) and media/political communication research (on the processes and influences that political, economic and media systems have on media coverage and news) to better understand the power of media in selecting, interpreting and propagating politically relevant information.

Overall, the central argument has merit and is well articulated. Moreover, author advances often very interesting critical points (both in terms of the evaluation of the evidence and in terms of broader theoretical issues). For example, particularly noteworthy in my opinion were the discussion of social evolution in Chapter 2, the critique of what genetic inheritance studies can and cannot tell us in Chapter 3, the considerations concerning the validity and replicability of social psychological research in Chapter 4, the critique of media effects in

Chapter 5, the discussion of Media Bias in Chapter 6 or the reflection on what we can learn from research on Media Systems in Chapter 7.

Some crucial constructs for the development of the argument are – almost necessarily, given the scope of the book -presented very succinctly. In Chapter 2 the account of social representation theory does not seem to include significant critiques (see Voelklein and Howarth, 2005, for a summary), and literature on how new politically relevant social categories are established and negotiated (see e.g. Meredith and Richardson, 2019, or the literature on emergent social identity, e.g. Reicher, 1984). In Chapter 3, literature on the evolution of social representation and stereotypes (e.g. Schaller and Lantane, 1996), or a critique of evolutionary psychology (see, e.g. Gannon, 2002) would have been useful. In Chapter 4, I would have expected some coverage of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), especially given that it underpins much of the research reported on stereotyping, 'Groupishness' and intergroup bias. This is certainly understandable given the vast amount of literature reviewed and the extensive integration of literature from multiple disciplines.

I wonder if the use of a case study throughout, illustrating concretely and consistently how memetics, social psychology and media communication interact, constituting the 'invisible hand' in political communication would have been useful.

All in all, this is a really interesting book, which can provide the basis for a novel approach to understanding of media effects, and a series of testable hypotheses which can be the basis for further empirical work.

## References

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